

## **Synopsis of Ph.D Thesis**

**Title: The Absurd in Fiction by Women: a Study of Selected Novels**  
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### **Overview:**

Existentialism as a philosophy and the Absurd as its manifestation through the literary genres of fiction and drama has been historically and politically traced to the period around the Second World War, its coming of age and gaining literary visibility viewed as a postwar trend and preoccupation with it, a circumstantial phenomenon. The postwar period in Europe saw a sudden wave of writers, thinkers and philosophers dwelling on the existential dilemma. Existential concerns like ontological insecurity, awareness of the Being, anxiety of erasure through death, incertitude of life, futility of existence, freedom of choice, authentic versus inauthentic existence started surfacing in the works around this time finding a visible representation in the literature of the times especially in the works of Kafka, Camus, Dostoyevsky and Sartre and playwrights belonging to The Theatre of the Absurd as identified and termed by Martin Esslin. Incidentally, all works in philosophy and literature identified as works of the Absurd or believed to have traces of the Absurd have been produced by men. The Absurd canon thus seems to be an exceptionally and exclusively male space with only the singular exception of Simone de Beauvoir known for her existentialist concerns.

This thesis therefore focuses on exploring the experience of the Absurd and its expression in works of women authors as something that transcends temporal and geographical boundaries and cuts across culture, race and community. Through the analysis of the works of six women authors of three nationalities, writing in different ages and contexts and primarily concerned with different issues, the thesis traces the unmistakable preoccupation of women authors with the Absurd and its expression in these works at thematic, structural and linguistic levels. The thesis postulates that for

women as cultural constructs, the experience of the Absurd is not circumstantial but organic to their consciousness and its manifestation therefore, inevitable in their works.

Various feminist and postmodern readings of works by women authors have somehow overlooked this close association of the female experience with the Absurd leaving out the Absurd as an exclusively male literary space and domain encased in history as an intellectual movement that rose, peaked, fell and disappeared. The thesis addresses this gap and studies these texts as female treatises of the Absurd, focusing on the experience, understanding and expression of the Absurd as a woman which is markedly different. While some of the concerns may overlap with those the canon represents, there are additional existential concerns felt by women because of their colonised consciousness and their acquired feminine sensibility. The expression likewise at the linguistic and structural levels departs in many ways from the conventionally recognisable features that define works of the Absurd.

The thesis purports to state that primary to all other preoccupations for a woman writer is the preoccupation with the Absurd and this will be visible even if works are randomly analysed. They will show traces and elements of the Absurd because the Absurd cannot be separated from the female consciousness.

## **Chapter one**

### **Introduction: Tracing the Absurd in Philosophy and Literature**

Chapter one attempts an understanding of the philosophy of existentialism and the Absurd as essayed in the works of different writers and thinkers. This exercise is important in order to lay the theoretical foundation of the thesis and the premise of the hypothesis. The chapter begins by dwelling on the Hegelian notion of pure Being which is equal to non-Being or pure 'nothingness' positing that it is the individual perception of the Being that leads to 'becoming'. Being contains the paradoxical presumption that it is non-Being and 'becoming' both, negating that which it was a moment ago and thus

embodying 'nothingness' in its very notion, reflecting the germ of the Absurd which is defined by the embodiment of contingency and transience in its essence.

From the Hegelian notion of Being, non-Being and 'becoming', the chapter goes on to comprehend the concept of *Dasein*, the 'being-in-the-world' with a relationship with the world presented by Heidegger. Heidegger emphasises the idea of the 'thrownness' of *Dasein* which implies that *Dasein* didn't choose to come into the world but was thrown in the world in the face of death which underscores the absurdity of existence. Both Hegel and Heidegger give a lot of importance to perception; while Hegel speaks of the Being 'becoming' only with our perception of it, Heidegger regards *Dasein* as a Being with a lot of possibilities, the ability to perceive and the freedom to choose.

The idea of perception is traced to phenomenology which posits that the universe does not offer a universal experience; instead every individual exists in his or her own universe and it is one's perception that gives meaning and identity to things. Phenomenology refuses subject-object dichotomy as it professes that every subject has its own universe felt and made real not through objects but through sensory perceptions which foregrounds the workings of the consciousness. The idea of a subjective universe and a consciousness at work ascribing meaning to experience and awareness can be connected with existentialism which primes existence over essence and individual truth over universal truth and deconstructs universal connotations of good and bad replacing this binary with authentic and inauthentic.

The foregrounding of the consciousness in both phenomenology and existentialism presupposes the metaphysical distance between the Being and consciousness. Consciousness is aware of the Being and instrumental in enabling the process of 'becoming' and also providing a space for 'nothing' to materialise. One finds a strong manifestation of this abstraction in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* with Sartre laying a lot of emphasis on this distance between Being and consciousness as the source of individual freedom. Since Being is constantly in the process of 'becoming', this lends

it a kind of fluidity which is akin to Sartre's understanding of the Being without a predefined essence and how lack of essence is in fact the true essence of the Being.

This lack of essence or absence of an absolute fixed nature is seen as the source of freedom and also the source of 'nothingness' by Sartre and is responsible for making existence meaningful through conscious choices in the face of a finite existence to be sealed by death. The desire to make existence meaningful presupposes its essential meaninglessness which is also captured by Camus in the Sisyphian metaphor of pushing the boulder uphill only to have it roll downhill again symbolising drudgery, repetitiveness and the futility of human endeavour. For Sartre the divide between the *en soi* (In-itself) and the *pour soi* (For-itself), that is the impossibility of understanding the true nature of reality, the inevitability of the role-reversal of the subject-object status, the fissure of the Being from its authentic self and negation of expectations by reality combined with the threat of unforeseen yet eventual dissolution of the Being in death lead to the experience of 'nothingness'.

Having located the germ of the Absurd in the philosophy of Existentialism, the chapter also attempts to briefly trace the presence of the Absurd in Eastern or Oriental philosophy to *Shunyata* in Buddhism, Nothingness Theory in Physics and traces of it in Hindu Philosophy. It then goes on to theistic existentialists like Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Marcel and Tillich all of whom reaffirm their faith in the individual and the 'divine' within and the need and responsibility to seek and ascribe meaning at an individual level instead of believing in and subscribing to universal notions and concepts.

It then attempts to understand the stand of atheistic existentialists like Sartre, Dostoyevsky and Camus and points of departure in their philosophy too. It highlights that while Sartre believed in absolute freedom which he saw as defining human existence, Camus differed since he believed that freedom is finite and choices limited, given the finitude of human existence.

The common ground where both the theistic and atheistic schools of existentialism meet is that both schools presuppose an unfamiliar universe and perpetual uncertainty hovering over life which makes existence absurd and where individual encounter and experience matter the most and choice becomes crucial. From the absurdity of existence, the chapter attempts to understand the notion of the ‘Absurdity of Being’ as portrayed in the works of the Spanish philosopher Ortega and the Greek philosopher Diogenes.

The chapter then moves on to trace how the notion of the Absurd evolved and surfaced variously in philosophy in the works of Camus, Sartre and Nietzsche and in literature in the works of Shakespeare, Faulkner, Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Hemingway, Heller, and again Sartre and Camus. It concludes with an interesting finding which makes it clear that the germ of the Absurd evolved and grew to become visible only from late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century culminating in The Theatre of the Absurd making it more of a historic and political backlash foregrounding the Absurd as springing from the contrast between the aspirations of man and the silence or the indifference of the universe in which he exists and coming to terms with the inherent incoherence of the universe.

## **Chapter two**

### **The Absurd Redefined: An Experience and Expression**

**by Women Authors**

Chapter two of the thesis attempts to trace and identify elements of the Absurd in some sample works of women authors after trying to understand in what ways for women, encountering the Absurd is similar to and different from men. Using the theoretical foundation of the Absurd laid down in chapter one as the premise of its argument and hypothesis, this chapter initiates the making of a feminist poetics of the Absurd. Focusing on the Sartrean stand of hopelessness compounding because of an irreversible subject-object dichotomy, it emphasises on the increased metaphysical distance between the object and the perception of it not as an individual but as a woman,

a social and a cultural construct, and highlights the woman, signified, symbolically understood and culturally represented as non-man, lack and less equal. It also draws attention to the degree of existential and ontological angst as being higher in woman and her tragic ambivalence as she faces the threat of both dissolution of being in death and erasure of identity in patriarchy. Along with ontological anxiety is literary anxiety stemming from the tradition of 'literary paternity' which means an engulfing overwhelming patriarchal presence in not only life but also literature marginalising and alienating women and relegating them to the position of the Other, therefore accentuating the experience and the expression of the Absurd which makes the Absurd as organic to the writings of women authors as to their consciousness and entity.

Basing its case on the notion of gender as a superimposition on the consciousness creating socially and culturally constituted beings under its influence, the chapter concedes that though all genders are constructs and in that sense performative, they are defined by patriarchy which privileges and primes only one gender, the masculine above all others making the individual consciousness as a not-so-privileged gender more prone to be at odds with existence and sensing it at all levels - cultural, social, psychic and emotional more acutely.

If one were to take the case of only the two most visible genders, all marginalised beings, men or women experience the Absurd. But for women it is more acute and inevitable as in the process of vertical stratification, patriarchy relatively empowers even the most colonised of all men pushing the woman of the most colonised class to an abysmal bottom. Patriarchy may also set certain standards of gender-based performance for men, hegemonic masculinity for instance; however seen in a universal and larger context the demand for this kind of a performance or an expectation out of men privileges the masculine over the feminine gender.

The chapter then goes on to recalibrate the connotations of the terms: 'Absurdity of Being' to describe the woman's disharmony with her 'self' when she primes patriarchy over herself and her interests, and the 'Absurdity of Existence' when she is in tune with

herself and at loggerheads with patriarchy privileging herself over patriarchy and taking recourse to an alternate universe where she is central and all else peripheral, and formulates an alternate working definition of the Absurd which evolves as part of the hypothesis and forms the basis of the analysis of the primary sources:

*Absurd is the inevitable and inescapable situation unique to woman which she finds herself in at one point in time or another resulting from her fractured consciousness of 'I' and 'I as a woman' surfacing invariably and manifesting itself explicitly in the form of terror, fear, obsession, self-evasion, self-deception, dreams, fantasy, drudgery, abnormality, even success.*

*It is the cumulative, conscious though involuntary manifestation of the subconscious nothingness through an awareness of lack after entering the Symbolic order, which she has internalised in her formative years.*

After theorising the experience of the Absurd for women, the chapter then goes on to trace the element of the Absurd deeply entrenched and unwittingly presented in some classics like *Emma*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Frankenstein* by women authors where sometimes it is an alternate universe, and sometimes it is an alter ego at work, be it then in case of Emma who leads a self-evasive existence and resists patriarchy from within the system by trying to assume the masculine role of creator by resorting to phantom reality, building alternate and imagined realities and deciding people's destinies or Catherine who epitomises the default rebel trying to inhabit two worlds at once or Frankenstein who is the Other with a feminine sensibility, a victim of social and cultural bias and a positive embodiment of all negative attributes of its male creator Victor Frankenstein. Almost all of these works also portray a strong authorial anxiety which seeks an outlet through literary expression.

The chapter then attempts to map the Absurd in works by Indian women writers, tracing its distinct presence in the poetic sensibility of the *Bhakti* poet Mirabai who

openly rebels against patriarchy and established codes of conduct and propriety by seeking an alternate world and also the cultural and literary politics that deify and isolate her. Likewise it traces the experience of the Absurd voiced by female characters created by male authors like Tagore and briefly traces the tradition of women's writing in India and its positioning vis-à-vis the canon. This section also traces the representation and significance of women in Indian mythology which plays a critical role in defining and determining Indian cultural sensibility and presents the various patriarchal myths propagated and reinforced through mythology and religion that encase woman in a fixed rigid identity attributing her specific roles of wife, mother, care-giver, lover and the politics of labeling which is responsible for her fragmented consciousness and impedes her from realizing her authentic self.

It also briefly analyses the works of two contemporary Indian women authors Anita Desai's *Feasting and Fasting* and Mahashweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*, one of which is taken up for a detailed analysis in chapter three of the thesis on Indian women authors. The conclusion of the chapter reiterates the impossible predicament of the woman and her inimitable status of subject and object at once.

### **Chapter three**

#### **The Absurd in Indian Fiction: Mythic Manifestations of Self-annihilation in Mahashweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***

This chapter traces the presence of the Absurd as a thematic concern and in the structure and the language of two novels by two very noted Indian women writers Mahashweta Devi and Arundhati Roy. The works analysed are Devi's *Mother of 1084* and Roy's maiden novel *The God of Small Things* which won her the Booker Prize.

While *Mother of 1084* which was discussed briefly in the second chapter details the life and travails of Sujata, an urban upper-middleclass working Bengali woman trying

to come to terms with her son's brutal killing, *The God of Small Things* portrays the victimisation of lesser beings of both genders. Interestingly the oppressor in both instances is a ruthless, unscrupulous and indifferent system encompassing the family to start with and institutions like the state, the police and the law. The novels unfold in a communism-ridden Bengal and a communism-ridden Kerala respectively and expose the mounting fear in the psyche of the bourgeoisie which regards the rise of the lesser class and an alternate ideology lending a voice to less equal people as a threat to their hegemonic existence. The settings for the novels are almost Kafkaesque in spirit where the individual is battling with the various manifestations of an indifferent system. Both novels show how the logic behind marginalising, ostracising, isolating and annihilating is many-layered and the law of the oppressor who represents the hegemonic institutions reigns supreme. The faces of fascism can be religion, caste, class, gender or a reigning political ideology.

The Absurd not only lies in the extreme incongruity between the individual and his or her setting but also the unbelievably high degree of uncertainty and arbitrariness outlining existence incapacitating individual will and the ability to survive or sustain. In both novels, the offenders, Brati the Naxalite with his bourgeoisie origins and Velutha the independent Paravan communist pose a threat to the social setup. Brati has transgressed by endorsing the wrong ideology; Velutha has erred by loving an upper caste Syrian Christian divorcee who is a mother of two children. Both are mutilated beyond recognition, one reduced to a number '1084' and the other to pulp. Both become a memory that cannot be summoned. The absurdity lies in the fact that it is their socially constituted identities that pose a threat and their killings symbolise an effort to efface their identities and preserve sectarian politics.

The first part of the chapter traces how in *Mother of 1084* Sujata tries to eke out an alternate existence with the memories of her dead son within the space of his room by revisiting the forbidden and reliving the time spent with him and the trauma of his death even as her family refuses to participate in the mourning and carries on with the charade, living their life of bad faith. An attempt is made to reconstruct the past and redress gaps

that were left unaddressed by his untimely death through interactions with people he knew. Throughout, Sujata experiences Absurdity of Being because of her conformist lifestyle and the silence she maintains regarding her son's unexpected, unnecessary and cruel death. The Absurd manifests structurally in the narrative as an ailment - an appendix that eventually bursts and takes her life. The narrative is fragmentary and cryptic as if the narrator is incapacitated and experiences a dearth of expressions to articulate what is experienced which points at the inherent disability of language to function as a means of communication and expression. The narrative has conjoined episodes and memories of pain with an overlap of internal psychic pain and external physical pain culminating in a painful cry which is as much an external expression of bodily pain felt at the bursting of the appendix as an expression of anguish resulting out of the absence of an appropriate language to verbalise trauma and pain.

The section traces the encounter with the absurdity defining life and existence through Sujata's trauma and its expression which determines the structure of the narrative. Both tragic farce and irony are used as literary devices to express the Absurd whereas events are deliberately juxtaposed, ordered and sequenced in a specific manner to intensify the notion of the Absurd. The narrative is full of symbols bearing the mark of the Absurd including the emotionally bereft prop-like characters who are portrayed like caricatures and mere functional fixtures required to compliment a social setup without a subjectivity or any authenticity.

The linguistic analysis of the novel focuses on the woman as a signified, her subjectivity pre-decided and pre-determined by external signifiers and her subsequent loss of language after entering the Symbolic order which alienates her permanently. The conclusion of this section also postulates how the novel is a literary outlet and expression of the Absurd for the author who resorts to linguistic absolutism to narrate the events and portray the characters, silencing the dominant and powerful group and lending a powerful voice to the muted group. It also comments on Devi's strategy of resorting to parallel narratives: at one level she uses patriarchal myths and exploits the feminine stereotype to solidify her plot; at another level these can be seen as ploys that subvert and attack

hegemonic institutions especially the state and its fascist ways to curb the Naxal movement.

Roy's *The God of Small Things* focuses on the petrified existence of a marginalised Ammu with her tragically irreversible and socially fixed identity of a divorced mother of two children who has committed two deplorable and unpardonable acts – one, of marrying outside her community and another of abandoning her husband. The thematic analysis of the Absurd exposes the manner in which humans are commoditised and subjected to atrocities and exploitation to serve larger objectives and further the functioning of hegemonic institutions. It traces the juxtaposition of multiple universes – the universe with its scheming manipulating adults, the alternate universe which Ammu and Velutha create for themselves in order to escape life's harsh realities, the fantasy-laden mystical universe of the children which turns into a veritable nightmare and the universe of soul-destroying truths which victimises the most vulnerable, crushes the life force out of the living and pushes those alive into a death-like limbo.

The section in its analysis of the novel questions the compulsive nature of language to want to label and give a name to everything. This is perhaps the human's way of keeping the unfamiliar at bay and dealing with the unknown by attributing a label of familiarity that makes it a part of the known realm. At the same time there are experiences, relationships and traumas that are beyond the power of language to represent. If they are they stand to be trivialised, judged and ridiculed like the unspeakable relationship that forms between the twins - the adult Estha and Rahel, or the trauma following Velutha's death which Estha undergoes which is only aptly represented and expressed by his silence and his complete withdrawal from the world of words or the unnamable forbidden love that binds Ammu and Velutha together.

The analysis traces the Absurd experienced and expressed differently by different characters in the novel. Some are on a mission to find order in a chaotic universe, whereas some seek reconciliation and closure, still others accelerate their own debacle whereas some resist the onslaught of time and preserve a relic of their former selves

grappling with the truth of an absurd existence. The narrative is textured and has many layers of reality. Sometimes these layers are clearly demarcated, sometimes they fuse into each other the boundaries blurring and the lines dissolving. Dream sequences, asides and imaginings overlap reality creating an air of enigma and enchantment. The setting of the house of Ayemenem with its thick undergrowth gives an impression of the inanimate coming to life with a will of its own suppressing and throttling everything.

Dysfunctional families, non-normative relationships, incapacitated, deranged and deformed characters, unnerving obsessions and uncanny fixations all depicting the irrationality of the universe and the menace lurking in a place that has suddenly lost its familiarity and become strange are some of the elements that the section traces on the thematic and structural levels. The chapter also traces the venting of authorial anxiety through projective identification in the portrayal of Baby Kochamma who epitomises everything conventionally negative, feminine and evil as essayed in the monsters and hags of Indian mythology like Manthara which is evidence of an absurdity trapped in the author's psyche.

In both the novels, death is a structural prerequisite to convey the idea of the Absurd. Both the works have two brutal killings unprecedented in the violence around them and in their literary treatment. Both men who die are grieved by women who eventually succumb and perish thus giving an impression that for the Indian woman whose collective unconscious is deeply influenced by the culture and mythology of her land, her alternate universe too centres around a man and accelerates her death through psychic suicide following the death of the man she loves.

The chapter focuses on how in both the novels time is a constant presence, a trope that hangs heavy over the narrative bearing mute testimony to all that has taken place, sealing the saga of violence and bloodshed it has witnessed firsthand.

**Chapter four**  
**The Absurd in Canadian Fiction: Wounded Goddesses in**  
**Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* and**  
**Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman***

Chapter four delineates the Absurd as found in the works of Canadian authors Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence for their canonical works *The Edible Woman* and *A Jest of God* respectively. Both novels revolve around the predicament of the woman and the inevitable conflict between her compliant and rebellious halves leading to a fractured consciousness and dual selves opening up a void or an irreconcilable separateness between the two selves which only keeps worsening and is manifested variously at the physical and mental levels.

The chapter traces the journey of the protagonists from a state of self-evasion and bad faith to self-discovery and a conscious step towards an authentic life shunning a handed down and derived existence. Both Marian and Rachel suffer from anxiety of the self because of their small town origins and face societal pressure to conform to a prescriptive lifestyle. They both lead a claustrophobic and constricted lifestyle and use feminine strategies of interaction and expression like circumlocution, silence, euphemisms, half-finished utterances and interior monologues.

The chapter traces the physical unease which these women experience when subjected to a patriarchal gaze, Rachel for what she perceives as her awkward appearance and Marian when she has to doll up to please her boyfriend. The social alienation is felt more acutely by Rachel because of her single status and the absence of an emotional anchor in her life whereas in Marian's case the experience of the Absurd stems from her forced and continued conformity to her boyfriend Peter's standards.

Both heroines seek an alternate space for themselves which is structurally represented through the setting and characterisation: Rachel bonds with Nick in the wild and in his house while Marian feels drawn to Duncan the other man who is like an apparition that surfaces at the unlikeliest of places – the laundromat and Duncan’s surreal flat which he shares with his roommates.

The chapter highlights the split consciousness of the women explicit in the arrangement of the narrative, the sequencing of actions, the characterisation and the plot. The Absurd manifests at the physical level as an acute nausea for food in Marian’s case and a tumour in Rachel’s body. These aberrations are symbolic of the outwardly conforming inwardly absurd lives these women lead. A further, more concrete manifestation of the Absurd in *The Edible Woman* is in the persona of Duncan, the other man in Marian’s life who drifts in and out of the narrative like an apparition and is an important stepping stone in her path to self-actualisation. One is not sure till the very end if he exists for real or if he is a figment of Marian’s imagination. The air of ennui that surrounds him, his apathy for the written word, and the language of entropy he engages in heighten the effect of the Absurd. Characters surrounding Marian who are a part of her extended world are half-formed, mono-dimensional and grotesque like depictions in an Absurd play. They function more like symbols conveying a certain thought with an objective to create a poetic or a dramatic effect than entities who are allowed to develop and evolve on their own.

The air of menace increases to a fervent pitch till it gets unbearable for Marian who has to break free from Peter the hunter who is trying to ‘shoot’ her with a camera and capture her duplicitous self forever. The threat keeps increasing as first meat, then eggs and finally even vegetables and all other things edible acquire human attributes and seem to be living breathing beings resisting being consumed.

The thematic analysis also traces the heterosexual relationships as portrayed in the narrative none of which represent the norm. Likewise it deconstructs the notion of love

and motherhood, both highly haloed and propagated virtues in patriarchy. Characters are shadow projections and show ritualistic behaviour. The self's rebelliousness finds expression in unusual acts captured in highly dramatised scenes. The narrative showcases performative bodies which send out messages through their actions and movements. It is also punctuated with bizarre scenes and symbols that reinforce the idea of the Absurd.

Tracing the linguistic dimension of the Absurd, the chapter foregrounds the communication barrier that Marian experiences as a result of her sense of disharmony with the world around her. It observes duality of language which can conceal and reveal both as and when required to one's advantage thus positing that there is no truth other than what is made out of language. The chapter also highlights the Absurd effect created as a result of literal interpretation of expressions and their consequences. Likewise it exposes the ineptitude of language acutely felt by women since it doesn't empower or equip them to articulate their true desires.

The other section of chapter four that analyses Laurence's *A Jest of God* dwells on the Absurdity of Being experienced by Rachel as a result of her functional existence manifesting in her persona as borderline neurosis which is linguistically represented in the narrative. The interior monologues and the dialogues between the split selves reach fever-pitch till it is impossible to carry on and there is a communication breakdown. Tumultuous monologues juxtaposed against politically and socially correct perfunctory and ornamental exchanges result in linguistic absurd in the narrative. Here again it is evident that language as used and spoken by women is an alien medium of expression for them and they are compelled to seek an alternate tongue when they have to articulate the unspeakable. This manifests in the 'Tabernacle episode' when Rachel unknown to herself starts speaking in tongues which is indecipherable to her and the people around. The linguistic analysis also underscores the reductionist nature of language where one clipped exchange can clinch a conversation instead of opening it. Language thus disables instead of enabling communication as is obvious in the obligatory exchanges between the mother and the daughter and in the deliberately ambiguous interaction between Rachel and Nick.

The existential dilemma and the tragic ambivalence of the woman both as subject and object is highlighted in the thematic analysis along with the woman's desperate attempt to attain subject status through sexual gratification and free herself of a petrified and depersonalised existence. Increasing terror and the anxiety of being engulfed is mapped as is the animosity and hostility underlying relations. The section also analyses the structural features that reflect the Absurd: the dual selves asserting themselves alternately, explicit in mind-body dichotomy with the suppressed self trying to recreate reality which is structurally represented through a multiplicity of voices and structural parallels in the narrative which also intensify the notion of alienation.

Both the Canadian works deliberate over the impossibility of the Absurdity of Being and the infallibility of the Absurdity of Existence (as understood and explained in Chapter 2) as an existential choice. The Absurd is experienced, expressed and finally countered followed by a reconciliation with it. Both protagonists essay the spirit of Absurd heroines who are ready to face the Absurd and take a plunge without knowing what lies ahead. They refuse an erasure of their identity or an engulfment resisting the irrationality of the universe which is evident in the performative irrational behaviour of Marian when she bakes a cake in the shape of a woman and offers it to Peter and then devours it to make him realise how he has been consuming her slowly and surely and a seemingly irrational move by Rachel when she chooses to endorse the rumours of her false pregnancy doing the rounds in the village and being presumed to be the reason behind her relocation. The chapter shows how this gives them a sense of victory over the Absurd and prepares them for the uncertain future ahead.

## **Chapter five**

### **The Absurd in American and African-American fiction: From Death Wish and Rebirth in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* to an Exclusive Female Space beyond Enclosures in Toni Morrison's *Paradise***

Chapter five analyses two canonical works by two very noted American women authors written in different social, cultural and political milieu: Sylvia Plath's maiden novel *The Bell Jar* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* which she wrote after winning her Nobel Prize in literature.

The chapter analyses *The Bell Jar* which has been read as both a social critique and a psychological case study. Esther Greenwood the protagonist is trapped in her own mind. The Absurd lies in the fact that the psychological malaise that torments and haunts Esther is not her choosing. The way she is made, her unwholesomeness, her insecurities, her cynicism, her complexes, her intense character, her brooding and over-critical nature are not her choosing. The fact that she loses her father early in life, a trauma she keeps revisiting is not her choosing. These factors variously contribute to her failing mental health and are detrimental to her psyche but the presence or the occurrence of these factors in Esther's life are not her choosing. It is sheer coincidence, an accident that she is the way she is or the incidents in her life affect her the way they do. The chapter indicates how acutely the Absurd affects her disrupting the harmony of her existence.

Esther lives a constricted life in a postwar America where the state planned how women should lead their lives and systematically devised ways of conditioning them to lead a domesticated existence privileging the family's needs over their own individual aspirations denying them a subjectivity which contributes to the feeling of confinement and the painful consciousness of their 'thrownness' in the universe.

The thematic analysis also traces how perfectly normal people can suddenly cease to be normal and become deranged without undergoing an earth-shattering experience defying traditional views about mental illness and trauma. The novel is a disturbing read and unsettles the reader just as an Absurd play in performance would unsettle its audience. It brings to light unexplored and unaddressed issues lodged in the darkest recesses of the mind conveying that no issue or no trauma is big or small. It exposes the frailty and the unpredictability of the human mind which can snap any moment when exposed to the irrationality of the universe. It analyses issues like ontological insecurity, a

growing sense of alienation, the duplicity of existence which is visible in non-normative behavior and a deliberate attempt to be a non-Being or transform and metamorphose into another kind of Being by regressing into madness as a means to counter the Absurdity of Being. It closely maps the anxiety stemming from both, the threat perceived in erasure of identity and erasure of Being and the effort to overcome this anxiety through madness and attempted suicide.

The analysis of the structure of the novel reveals the undercurrent of anxiety and a constant awareness of the nothingness and emptiness at the core of existence captured in powerful scenes conveying apathy and passivity. The tone is bare and candid with unlikely and unusual confessions that ruffle the reader's expectations. Claustrophobia and menace hang heavy in the air with the familiar transitioning into unfamiliar. Relationships are parodied and undermined while characters show peculiar behavioral traits. A sense of deadness pervades the novel. Time is static and indefinable on several occasions, immobility is juxtaposed against vitality and actions alternate between lack of engagement and hyperactive engagement to kill time. Bizarre imaginings, dual selves, multiple voices, unusual spatial dynamics are some of the other features in the narrative depicting the Absurd that are traced and dwelt upon.

Cryptic, clipped language reflecting an emotionally stifled sensibility, careful arrangement of words and sentences and bilious humour intensify the expression of the Absurd at the linguistic level. The chapter also studies the use of language to the advantage of patriarchal ideologies and pursuits which leaves no linguistic space or language for the woman to express what she wants or to resist the pursuits. The language of the narrative is subversive and subtly mocks the institutions considered sacrosanct and above reproach. A peculiar effect is brought about by a disturbingly coherent flow of language from a supposedly deranged mind which deconstructs the universally accepted understanding of insanity. The language of the novel interspersed with vast stretches of silence is used to question the monotony of existence. There are instances of linguistic rebellion, use of performative language, and mythmaking through language which all add to the element of the Absurd at the linguistic level.

The Absurd is after all an effect created through various techniques like lapses in communication, peculiar behavior, unusual imagery, unconventional characterisation, scenes conceived with a poetic intensity all of which reflect the inherent strangeness of the universe. The reader is made to undergo and feel the incongruity and underlying disharmony and develop an awareness of the causes and the ways in which the Absurd can be countered. An Absurd treatise by a woman author will have some of these features and a lot of other features too which collectively create the Absurd.

Woman embodies nothingness. She tries to reject this nothingness by deliberately creating hectic activity around her. If lack of activity, monotony and immobility characterize what is conventionally understood and recognised as Absurd, too much of activity and entanglements bring about the same effect in Morrison's *Paradise*. A woman tries to resist nothingness by putting on a performance. Hysteria, hypochondria, drama, strutting under male gaze, motherhood are part of her armoury. Absurdly, when she uses these weapons, she is easily accepted and identified as one of her species. The moment she discards all this and tries to rise above it or go beyond it, her behaviour becomes absurd under the male gaze. The second half of the fifth chapter focuses on patriarchal politics in *Paradise* and what it proclaims as Absurd which is the woman's own world – an alternate world rich with dreams, desires, visions and fantasies that allow her to imagine and create her own truth of life and existence, resort to meaningless actions and incoherent babble, laugh, fight, cry, dance, sing, wander, eat the way she pleases – in other words, where there is a thorough redefining of all actions. When this is done by the women in the Convent in *Paradise*, the act of creating an alternate 'Paradise', is unacceptable to the men who condemn it as absurd and unnatural and punish the women for daring to be different and breaking rules.

The setting of most plays belonging to The Theatre of the Absurd is removed from reality with an uncanny starkness about them and one or two objects acting as powerful symbols or metaphors as the intention is to communicate the void and emptiness defining existence and the futility underlying human endeavour. In the works

of women authors the Absurd festers in the household, in a familiar setting and in the social life, the woman leads. Here there aren't any strangers to threaten. The women are under the threat of their own family members, spouse, kin, children, relatives, friends and the community. The hatred and animosity Mavis experiences within her own family gives rise to an unspeakable terror. Menace lurks just outside her door. All the women who seek refuge in the Convent which becomes an alternate world for them are persecuted in some way or the other and are battling their Absurd Beings. Before arriving at the Convent they have been reduced to the barest possible state of existence without a sole possession or individual in the world to call their own. The Convent on the other hand offers the warmth and security of a home but is an absurd shelter in the eyes of the outside world.

The Convent stands to defy established means and norms of communication and houses a sense of timelessness around it. None of the women in the Convent display normative or compliant behaviour or appearance and their interesting juxtaposition with the women of the village that represent the norm makes the women in the Convent appear absurd. Some have a vision, some are plagued by visions and hallucinations, some are driven by an illusion, some follow an invisible finger or a voice in their head. There are multiple layers at which communication takes place between the real and the unreal worlds. Spaces become metaphors and scenes become symbols to convey something more profound than what is visible on the surface. Multiple realities, alternate worlds, magic realism, spectral figures add to the effect of the absurd.

The narrative of *Paradise* has an interesting duality about it. The chapter traces this ambivalence in the narrative. At several places in the narrative, the reader has to pause and reflect on who the narrator empathises with; the obviously anticipated is thus subverted. Irony and sarcasm underlie the narration and yet by giving an insight into the minds of the nine men who set out on the mission to kill the women and thus eradicate evil, the narrative refrains from villainising them. It lays bare the trauma of the predator giving the hunter's side of the story and showing that it is not the apparent. It reveals their helplessness and in a way is empathetic towards them. It shows their desperation of

preserving their identity and effort of ‘paradising’ the village of Ruby at all costs which makes their existence worthwhile for them. At the same time it also exposes the futility and falsity of this commitment which comes at the expense of innocent lives. It shows how human life is undermined and devalued, living humans seen as a threat to a way of life and therefore sacrificed only to preserve an ideology, abstractions and idealisms given more importance than lives and people, the sacrifice of individual will in the face of a collective will, the urge to overpower, vanquish and overthrow and establish an absolute rule with no room or tolerance for dissent or an alternate worldview. It shows an ideology of absolutism relentlessly at work effacing all that is in its way in the name of righteousness; a violently fascist approach to a supposed threat in the form of a few women who have broken free of tradition.

*Paradise* is richly textured with many layers of reality which overlap and sometimes contradict each other giving an impression that there is no absolute truth. All is relative and becomes meaningful through one’s perception of it.

## **Chapter six**

### **Conclusion: The Absurd Traced and Transcended**

The final chapter which is the conclusion gives an account of all the findings that have been made in the preceding chapters of the thesis – conclusions related to the universal notion of the Absurd which can be summed up as alienation resulting out of ‘thrownness’ and anxiety resulting from the anticipation and apprehension of erasure, a literary depiction of this state of the human mind or an attempt to transcend it as also conclusions related to a gendered notion of the Absurd by gendering the experience and the resulting expression and tracing it in fiction by women that does not belong to the genre of the Absurd.

It presents a brief summary and a comparative analysis of the chapters bringing to light similarities and differences in the female experience and expression of the Absurd in the works chosen as primary resource. At some point in time or other, when pushed to a

boundary situation, the woman is bound to counter the absurdity of her existence, the fracture in her consciousness. Whether it takes the face of terror, fear, obsession, self-evasion, self-deception, dream, fantasy, illness or abnormality, she is bound to undergo it in the path to her self-realisation if she needs to transcend patriarchy and assert her subjectivity and individuality. The split can be damaging or it can heal with time but it cannot be escaped. The shock of the absurdity and meaninglessness of existence comes with a heightened sense of consciousness, a highly awakened mind and an evolved sensibility and sensitivity to things around. The terrifying starkness might lead to different states. It could result in a catastrophe like in *The God of Small Things* and *Mother of 1084*, or make her do something unexpected which might look ambiguous and irrational like in *The Edible Woman* and *A Jest Of God* or a gradual negation followed by an assertion of the self as in *The Bell Jar*. Or it can be akin to what the women in *Paradise* do - learn to overcome, face, vanquish, come to terms, do away with this absurdity – by ‘stepping out’ of outlines: a step, which may be perceived as outrageously absurd by the outside world conditioned by patriarchy. Then, the Absurd loses the terror, the edge and becomes beautiful.

The conclusion dwells especially on the structural features of the narratives that make the Absurd explicit thus undermining the general presumption related to structure of fiction by women. While dealing with the findings related to linguistic Absurd, it first focuses on the general features related to the use of language that make it an absurd medium of communication as was established by poststructural studies of literature. Likewise it focuses equally on the notion of linguistic alienation resulting in the Absurd and the expression of this alienation through the language of the chosen works.

The conclusion also justifies the selection of the primary sources that were chosen for a close textual analysis in order to establish the hypothesis presented in the introduction understanding them as works with traces of the Absurd in the context of their socio-cultural, political and historical realities and in some cases as semi-autobiographical expressions.

The second part of the conclusion highlights the prospects and the future scope and relevance of this thesis and the possibility and rationale of extending and building on the study carried out in the thesis. It dwells on the possibility of using the study as a premise to build a feminist poetics of the Absurd exploring the structural and linguistic expressions and features that might enable a gendering or even a transgendering of the Absurd. It could be used to explore the polyphonic feature of female narratives that negates a central subject position and a single authorial voice and look at a distinct style of female writing as different from women's writing and even feminist writing – one embodying the stereotypes attached to women's fiction and the other essaying empowered or rebellious writing and thus begin a trend of locating aesthetic fulfillment and pleasure in female and queer writing. The conclusion also explores the future possibility of a project in semiotics based on the thesis. It can also be a reference to work on an ethics of the self which is not totally contained within the gender framework.